

Original Paper

Far from the Madding Crowd

— A Study of Chapter Forty —

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Abstract

In this paper I discuss Chapter 40 titled as “On Casterbridge Way” of *Far from the Madding Crowd* by Thomas Hardy, and attempt to answer two questions which arise in this chapter. One question is the following: Why does Hardy make Fanny Robin, a minor character, appear on the scene in Chapter 40, and then describe her so dramatically and impressively as if she were a heroine? The second question is as follows: How should we interpret the episode about Fanny and the dog that helps her arrive at Casterbridge Union-house?

As a result of a study of these questions, I came to the following conclusions. The introduction of Fanny Robin is part of a strategy to make the climax of the story more complex and effective. The episode about Fanny and the dog is meant to express mankind's deep attachment to life when confronted with imminent death.

Introduction

Far from the Madding Crowd (1874) is not considered one of Thomas Hardy's best novels, but it is significant in that it established Hardy's reputation as a rising writer, and laid the foundation for future works.

Far from the Madding Crowd is the first of Hardy's Pastoral novels and a melodrama in which he uses various characters to describe a variety of human experiences.

The major characters of this story are the

heroine owner of a farm, Bathsheba Everdene, Shepherd Oak, Sergeant Troy, and Farmer Boldwood. The minor characters include Liddy Smallbury, Bathsheba's maid, and Fanny Robin, who is deserted by Sergeant Troy in favor of Bathsheba.

This paper concentrates primarily on Fanny Robin. At first, she appears as a shadowy woman in only a few scenes, but after a long absence from the story, she suddenly reappears on the scene in Chapter 40. Hardy makes her reappearance seem very important

and describes her behavior dramatically and impressively. What does the episode in Chapter 40 involving the reappearance of Fanny add to the plot as a whole?

A lonely pregnant woman is advancing through the night on the Casterbridge highway towards the Casterbridge Union-house. As she wearies and begins to think that her desperate journey is hopeless, a big black dog suddenly and miraculously appears to help her complete the journey. What does this allegorical episode of a woman and a dog symbolize? Why does Hardy use a dog to help her instead of a person or a carriage?

I attempted to answer the questions above by analyzing the story line and consulting a dictionary of symbols and imagery.

I Symbolic images of death

Ian Gregor comments as follows:

Chapter 40 of *Far from the Madding Crowd* can be thought of the longest chapter in nineteenth-century fiction, not in terms of pages, which are few, but in terms of the experience it conveys¹⁾.

This chapter consists of only eight pages, in which a woman's experiences over a 12-hour period are dramatically told. At the same time, the woman's experiences over 20 years — her whole life — are told. As Ian Gregor says, this chapter is 'the longest chapter in terms of the experience it conveys'.

In Chapter 40, a dying pregnant woman, who was deserted by a man, is advancing through the night on the Casterbridge highway, half-walking and half-crawling in the darkness towards the Casterbridge Union-house. This desperate journey on the highway is to be her final effort, for she is destined to die in childbirth in the Union-House. Therefore Hardy interweaves symbolic images of death to various parts of the episode. I will

quote some examples from the text.

- Ex. 1. ... the bark of a fox, its three hollow notes being rendered at intervals of a minute with the precision of a *funeral bell*? (p.235)²⁾
- Ex. 2. ... to find herself in the depths of a moonless and starless night. (p.233)
- Ex. 3. 'If I could only get there!' she said. 'Meet him the day after tomorrow: God help me! Perhaps I shall be in my grave before them!' (p.233)
- Ex. 4. She crawled to the bridge. During the effort each breath of the woman went into the air as if never to return again. (p.235)
- Ex. 5. ... the grim character of what was beneath showed through it, as the shape of a body is visible under a winding-sheet. (p.237)

Thus, while Hardy gives us a hint that the woman will die soon, he describes a deep attachment to life through her behavior. Despite having a premonition that she is on the brink of death, she struggles to survive and attain her goal of reaching the Union-house.

She shows her strong will to live by fantasizing, making crutches of faggots in shape of the letter Y, supporting herself on an iron-railed fence, and by deceiving herself about the distance remaining as shown in the following passage:

She passed five more.
'It lies only five further.'
She passed five more.
'But it is five further.'
... (p.235)

II What does the dog symbolize?

However, she finally grows weary, begins to lose hope and lays herself down against a

guardstone of the bridge. Suddenly a dog that 'seemed to be of too strange and mysterious a nature to belong to any variety among those of popular nomenclature' (p.236) appears.

From the stripe of shadow on the opposite side of the bridge a portion of shade seemed to detach itself and move into isolation upon the pale white of the road. It glided noiselessly towards the recumbent woman. (p.236)

This seems to be a mysterious and allegorical episode. Howard Babb comments on this episode as follows:

What the whole episode means is beyond argument, surely, but I am less certain about how a reader responds to it³.

How does a reader respond to the episode about Fanny and the dog? I suppose he or she wonders whether or not the dog is real. I believe the dog is created in her own imagination, because the narrator also refers to the dog as follows:

Night, in its sad, solemn, and benevolent aspect, apart from its stealthy and cruel side, was *personified in this form* [= dog]. Darkness endows the small and ordinary ones among mankind with poetical power, and even suffering *threw her idea into figure* [= dog]. (p.236)

(my italics)

I think the dog was a figment of her imagination and embodies her deep attachment to life. However, there is the question of why Hardy makes a dog appear as a helper on her journey. Hardy often uses symbolism, metaphor, and simile skillfully in his works. Perhaps he uses the dog as a symbol of death, since, according to *The Herder Symbol Dictionary*, a dog is a symbol of Hades.

In many cultures the dog is associated with death, it guards the realm of the dead and is the psychopomp (spirit guide) or mediator between the worlds of the dead and living (e.g., Anubis, Cerberus). The Gods of multivocal, nocturnal (or dark) realms sometimes appear in the shape of a dog (e.g., Hecate, the Greek Goddess of the Cross-Roads)... The dog is a nearly universal symbol of fidelity and is (e.g., in Japan) a mythic helper and protector, especially of women and children⁴.

How can 'the sick and weary woman', in the last month of pregnancy, walk while leaning on a dog? I think her attachment to life must have made her imagine herself in the figure of a dog and she may have crawled desperately on her hands and knees like a dog, imagining herself helped by the dog even though the dog isn't real. Finally, with the dog's help, she reaches the gate of the Union-house and falls forwards 'in a bowed attitude' (p.237), to become 'the panting heap of clothes'. (p.237)

Let's review the conversation between the woman (= Fanny) and staff at the Union-house.

'How did she get here?' said one of the women.

'There is a dog outside.' murmured the overcome traveler. 'Where is he gone? He helped me.'

'I stoned him away.' said the man. (p.238)

I think the sentence, 'I stoned the dog away', means her attachment to life is given up at last. Hardy is telling his readers that the time is coming near when she will die, and she dies on the evening of that day.

Also, as we read through Chapter 40, we wonder why Hardy never uses the proper name 'Fanny Robin' although it is quite obvi-

ous that he is referring to Fanny. He refers to Fanny using common nouns, such as 'the woman', 'the pedestrian', 'the way-farer', 'the girl', 'the sick and weary woman', 'the overcome traveler', 'the small and supple one' and 'the panting heap of clothes'.

Why does Hardy keep Fanny anonymous? Perhaps it is because he doesn't care who the person is; that is, for Hardy it is not important whether the woman is Fanny or some other person. I think Hardy must have wanted to express a generally rebellious feeling against the bitter absurdity of the oppressive world which results in people dying needlessly. At the same time Hardy may have wanted to tell us that life is precious by portraying a woman who uses every device at her command in a desperate effort to survive against long odds.

III Hardy's strategy in Chapter 40

In Chapter 40, Fanny seems to be regarded as a major character although she is only minor one at the beginning of this novel. Why does Hardy deal with her as if she were a heroine?

Ian Gregor comments on this question as follows:

Hardy in doing this is working not so much on behalf of Fanny as on behalf of Bathsheba. . . . That, for Hardy, is to be the dramatic climax of the scene, not any revelation about Fanny or her child. . . . The way is now clear for the real climax, not the effect on Bathsheba of 'the unconscious pair', but the effect on Bathsheba of Troy's reaction to that pair⁵.

After Fanny's death, her coffin is carried into Bathsheba's house as a result of fact that, because of the drunkenness of Poorgrass who was sent for Fanny, the coffin is delayed in reaching the burial ground and the burial

cannot take place on that day. This accidental trick of fortune makes Bathsheba realize that her marriage to Troy is over. At the same time, she realizes that deep down in her soul, she still loves her husband Troy, even though on the surface, she believes that she hates him and desires to divorce him.

The following scene shows her infatuation with Troy:

When Bathsheba saw her husband kiss dead Fanny and baby in the coffin, she cries in despair, 'Don't — don't kiss them! O Frank, I can't bear it — I can't! I love you better than she did: Kiss me too, Frank — kiss me! You will, Frank, kiss me too!' (p.262)

Exclaiming thus, she springs towards him and flings her arms round Troy's neck. However, he rejects her, declaring as follows:

'Ah! don't taunt me, madam. This woman is more to me, dead as she is, than ever you were, or are, or can be.' And he turns to Fanny and says, 'in the sight of Heaven you are my very, very wife!' (p.263)

The bitter quarrel between Bathsheba and Troy over Fanny's coffin discloses Bathsheba's psychology as a woman not a wife, and produces a more effective, dramatic climax to this novel than Hardy could have achieved in any other way without Chapter 40.

Hardy focuses on Bathsheba, not on Fanny and her baby; that is to say, in order to generate the tragedy in Bathsheba's recognition that her husband loves his lover more than his wife, Hardy describes all the pathos of Fanny's desperate journey on the highway. It seems to be Hardy's strategy to change the flow of the whole plot to achieve a more dramatic and effective climax.

Conclusion

The importance of Chapter 40 is that it incorporates some features characteristic of Hardy's writing style in it. One of them is humanism; we can see this in the way that Hardy focuses on Fanny Robin, a minor character and uses the whole eight pages of Chapter 40 to describe her with more pity and human love than he ever gives to Bathsheba, a major character. Moreover, although it is obvious that the woman is Fanny, Hardy intentionally calls her by common nouns, such as 'a woman', 'a pedestrian' or 'the girl'. By not referring to her by name, Hardy may want to protest severely against what he calls the 'Immanent Will' that drives mankind to the limit of their life.

At the beginning of the story, Fanny is treated as if she were a shadowy person who is not important to the plot. However, in Chapter 40 and thereafter, she is treated as if she were a central character in the plot. That is, she dies in childbirth at the Union-house, which in turn affects the development of the plot by causing a series of tragic events, one after another.

First, Bathsheba and Troy are faced with ruin in their married life, and Troy disappears without saying a word. After a few years, Farmer Boldwood, who loves Bathsheba deeply, asks her to marry him. Overcome by his fervor, she consents unenthusiastically to his proposal of marriage. On the night when the engagement party is held, Troy suddenly appears and asserts that she is his wife by law. Boldwood, in a frenzy of despair, shoots Troy dead and goes to prison.

Finally Bathsheba marries Oak who has been in love with her in his heart for a long time. Thus, Fanny's reappearance and death result in a succession of tragic events. Moreover, as a consequence Fanny takes revenge on her antagonist, Bathsheba, from her grave.

In addition, Chapter 40 would be very dramatic as a one-act play even if it were separated from all other chapters of this novel, and plays a very important role in creating an unexpected, dramatic climax to a well-constructed novel. I think it is Hardy's strategy to put in Chapter 40 as a strong accent to a long plot with Bathsheba as the central figure.

Another feature characteristic of Hardy's writing is an emphasis on the value of life. For instance, the episode of Fanny and the dog shows us a deep attachment to life. Hardy emphasizes the value of life by the way in which Fanny is able to contrive fantasies which enable her to live on in the face of imminent death.

I think her strong will to live on and to have someone help her reach the Union-house makes her fantasize the dog that enables her to live to complete her journey.

Therefore, if Chapter 40 had not been incorporated into the plot, no dramatic developments would have been seen until last Chapter 57 where Hardy concludes this novel as the happy ending by making Bathsheba and Oak marry, and the conclusion might not have been satisfactory. From this viewpoint it may safely be said that Hardy's strategy of placing Chapter 40 in the plot of *Far from the Madding Crowd* was very successful.

Notes

- 1) Clarke G (1993) (ed.) *Thomas Hardy Critical Assessments*, Helm Information Ltd., East Sussex, p.42.
- 2) Hardy T (1985) *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Macmillan, London, p.235. (The page number of each

quotation from this textbook is written at the end of each sentence.)

- 3) Clarke G, *op. cit.*, p.38.
- 4) Mathews B (1978) *The Herder Symbol Dictionary*, Chirion Publication, Illinois, p.58.
- 5) Clarke G, *op. cit.*, p.43.